PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
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Editor's note

Some of our members had been to Binsar, Pangot & Sattal for a week-long trip from April 24th to May 1st, 2018. In this Special Issue of the Pitta, we are happy to bring you two different perspectives of the trip, along with a number of colourful photographs. We hope you will find this Special Issue interesting.

WILD AND IN COLOUR
TRIP REPORT: BINSAR, PANGOT & SATTAL

Shilka Chaudhari

The group at Binsar (Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

On exploring, Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) at Almora reveals a diverse range of flora and fauna, mesmerizing views of snow-capped Himalayas and lush jungles echoing with the sounds of streams and melodious chirping. This hidden gem in the Almora district of Uttarakhand offers the best of nature, wildlife and adventure and is the best place for bird watching. The Sanctuary is located in the Himalayas atop the Jhandi Dhar Hills, about 33km north of the Almora town.

We looked forward to a one-week trip with 19 birders. The journey route was Hyderabad-Delhi-Kathgodam. From Kathgodam we hired local vehicles to travel around Binsar, Pangot & Sattal.

We were greeted by the sighting of two Indian Grey Hornbills (*Ocyceros birostris*) right outside the Kathgodam station. Calls of Barbets could be heard from a distance. We spotted a Blue-throated Barbet (*Megalaima asiatica*) near a local hotel where we had our breakfast. We also spotted a number of species like Rufous Treepie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*), Himalayan Bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucogenys*), some Swifts and a Crested Serpent Eagle (*Spilornis cheela*).

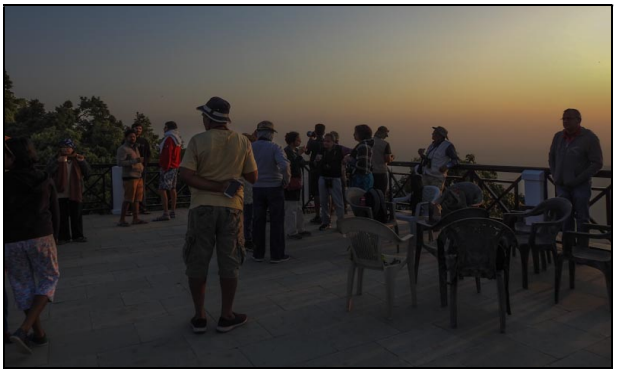
Himalayan Bulbul (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Crested Serpent Eagle
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

We reached the KMVN (Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam) Tourist Rest House located at an elevation of 2,412m above sea level. The property was constructed in 1988 and was being renovated. It was made of wood and bricks with sloping slate roofs coloured in orange. The estate overlooked a sweeping panorama of the Kumaon Himalayas that includes the perennially snow-capped peaks of Trishul, Nanda Devi, Sunanda Devi, Panchachuli, and Nanda Kot. The forest is a protected reserve with a variety of flora, avian life, a sizeable population of deer, wild boar, and fox. We decided to take a walk in the evening on the scenic forest trail, and the dense rhododendron and oak provided much-needed fresh air and tranquility. We often spotted Grey-winged Blackbirds (*Turdus boulboul*).

Grey-winged Blackbird (Photo: Ajit Kumar Mahendra)

Coal Tit (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)



Taking in the sunrise at Binsar (Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

We decided to spend two-and-a-half days at Binsar. The mornings were nippy and evenings quite cold. The view of the sunrise across the snow-covered Himalayas was rejuvenating.

During our stay we spotted a number of species like the Green-backed Tits (*Parus monticolus*), Coal Tits (*Periparus ater*), Eurasian Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*), Black-headed Jay (*Garrulus lanceolatus*), Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo (*Dicrurus remifer*), Verditer Flycatchers (*Eumyias thalassinus*) and Ultramarine Flycatchers (*Ficedula superciliaris*).

Oak and pine trees presented an opportunity to sight a variety of woodpeckers like Himalayan Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos himalayensis*),

Eurasian Jay (Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Black-headed Jay (Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Verditer Flycatcher (Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Brown-fronted Woodpecker
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

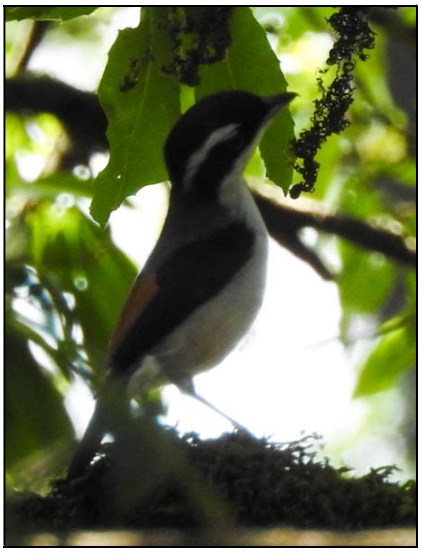
Bar-tailed Treecreeper
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Rufous-bellied Woodpecker (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Yellow Wagtail (Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Rufous-bellied Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos hyperythrus*) and Brown-fronted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos auriceps*). We were graced by the presence of the melodious Rufous Sibia (*Malacias capistratus*). White-tailed Nuthatch (*Sitta himalayensis*) and Bar-tailed Treecreepers (*Certhia himalayana*) were also spotted.

Point Zero provided an unhindered view of the peaks of Chaukhamba, Panchachuli, Nanda Devi and Mt. Trishul. White-browed Shrike-babbler (*Pteruthius flaviscapis*) was sighted with nesting material in its beak. Black Eagle (*Ictinaetus malayensis*) was seen hovering around cliff edge of hilly terrain. Oriental Turtle Doves (*Streptopelia orientalis*) were commonly sighted from the terrace of the hotel. While walking around in the forest we could hear the calls of Barking Deer although few had seen it upfront.



White-browed Shrike-babbler
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

A few seasoned birders had spotted the Eurasian Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) in flight. Some of them spotted Whiskered Yuhina (*Yuhina flavicollis*) and Kalij Pheasant (*Lophura leucomelanos*) on their way to Point Zero. Common Rosefinches (*Carpodacus erythrinus*), Yellow Wagtails (*Motacilla flava*) and Yellow-browed Warblers (*Phylloscopus inornatus*) were also spotted. Spotting of the Cheer Pheasant (*Catreus wallichii*) deserves a worthy mention. Scaly Thrush (*Zoothera dauma*), Hill Partridge (*Arborophila torqueola*), Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*) and Grey Bushchat (*Saxicola ferreus*) were also seen. We could hear the distant calls of Coppersmith Barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*) and Black Francolin (*Francolinus francolinus*). Puran Singh, a local of Almora district, was a seasoned birding guide, and his insightful knowledge regarding birding locations was very helpful.

A view of Sattal Lake
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Our stay at the Rest House was comfortable with sumptuous breakfast and meals, though one major issue was that every day the electricity was available only between 6:30PM to 9:00PM. My favourite place was the rest house terrace.

The next three days were to be spent in and around Sattal.

Grey Bushchat (Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Sattal, which translates to seven lakes, is a cluster of seven interconnected lakes in Nainital**.** Located at the foothills of the Himalayas, the region is nestled between fragrant forests of oak and pine. It is one of the last few unspoiled freshwater biomes in the country, and attracts birds and bird watchers alike.

Slaty-headed Parakeet Male
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Slaty-headed Parakeet Female (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Plum-headed Parakeet Male (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

The drive around hilly terrains was scenic. On our way to the destination we stopped midway to see a flock of Slaty-headed Parakeets (*Psittacula himalayana*). We also spotted Verditer Flycatcher, Ashy Drongos (*Dicrurus leucophaeus*), Spot-winged Starlings (*Saraglossa spiloptera*) and Kalij Pheasant. After reaching our guest house, we dropped our belongings and headed for some evening birding. We spotted the Russet Sparrow (*Passer rutilans*) and Brown-fronted Woodpecker.

Meanwhile a poster outside the guest house canteen caught our attention. The Uttarakhand Forest Department and Strabo Pixel Club were organizing a 3-day bird festival in Nainital. Sattal was one of the birding spots included for the avian festival.

Walking down to the Studio
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Early mornings we would head towards a place nicknamed ‘The Studio’. It turned out to be our favourite spot for observing birds at their best. We descended down a flight of moist and mossy stairs which was a gateway to this birding heaven. We saw a number of photographers trying to get a shot of the Long-tailed Broadbill (*Psarisomus dalhousiae*). I got the perfect shot when it perched on its nest for a few seconds.

Meanwhile, walking down further we spotted Scarlet Minivets (*Pericrocotus (flammeus) speciosus*), Bar-tailed Treecreepers, Asian Paradise-flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*), Oriental White-eye (*Zosterops palpebrosus*), Blue Whistling Thrush (*Myophonus caeruleus*), Eurasian Blackbirds, Common (*Acridotheres tristis*) and Jungle Mynas (*Acridotheres fuscus*), White-tailed Nuthatch, Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon (*Treron sphenurus*), Red-wattled Lapwing, Red-billed Blue Magpies (*Urocissa erythrorhyncha*), Coal Tit, Lesser Yellownape (*Picus chlorolophus*), Oriental Magpie Robin (*Copsychus saularis*), White-throated Fantail (*Rhipidura albicollis*), Black-lored Tit (*Parus xanthogenys*) and the Red-billed Leiothrix (*Leiothrix lutea*) (a.k.a. Pekin Robin or Chinese Nightingale).

Long-tailed Broadbill
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Blue Whistling Thrush
(Photo: Ajit Kumar Mahendra)

As we headed further down to get a closer view of the waterfall, we noticed a woodpecker with a huge crest. There is a possibility that we might have caught a glimpse of the Himalayan Flameback (*Dinopium shorii*), but unfortunately the identity remains unverified. The native Black Bulbuls (*Hypsipetes leucocephalus*) were also spotted on the way.

White-throated Laughingthrush (Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Common Kingfisher (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Meanwhile, a few seasoned souls had sighted Blue-winged Siva (*Siva cyanouroptera*), Kalij Pheasant and Chestnut-tailed Minla (a.k.a. Bar-throated Siva) (*Siva strigula*). Vikram, Sheetal and the others had spotted a giant owl being chased by flock of Drongos. The Ashy Drongo was a common sight. The Common Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) was often sighted at the lake. We had spotted a flock of White-throated Laughingthrushes (*Garrulax albogularis*) taking a dip in one of the streams near the lake. So were Striated Laughingthrush (*Garrulax striatus*) noticed.

We spotted a number of small-sized birds. But their constant hopping on trees and shrubs made it almost impossible to photograph and equally difficult to identify. We also spotted a Brown Dipper (*Cinclus pallasii*) in one of the lakes. Our birding guide Suresh helped us to locate a Spotted Forktail (*Enicurus maculatus*) and Crested Kingfisher (*Megaceryle lugubris*). We also spotted a pair of Plumbeous Water Redstarts (*Rhyacornis fuliginosa*).

Brown Dipper Juvenile (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Spotted Forktail (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

In Pangot, we saw a number of Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) living in harmony with humans. We spotted a nest with three chicks in it on a ceiling, outside a local *kirana* shop. In the forests we sighted a female Kalij Pheasant flying across the road. We did not have much luck at birding in this spot except for the fact we spotted a number of beautiful butterflies. I got one good shot of the Common Mormon Butterfly.

On our return journey towards Sattal, it started to rain. We decided to stop at a local restaurant for lunch. We are amazed to see a huge flock of Jungle Babblers (*Turdoides striata*) in the garden. We also spotted a number of Greater Yellownapes. On the last day some of the members opted to shop and go kayaking. The stay at Sattal forest guest house was splendid.

Barn Swallow chicks (Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Red-billed Blue Magpie (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

On our way back to Kathgodam station we decided to stop at a small hotel for a coffee break. We decided to birdwatch in the backyard which was lush green. It had a plantation of bananas and mangoes. We spotted some interesting species like a flock of Grey Treepies (*Dendrocitta formosae*) and Red-billed Blue Magpies. We saw a bright red bird perched on top of a banana tree, which was the size of a sunbird. Siddharth photographed the bird. After a few minutes of discussion over the identity, it was concluded that it was the Mrs. Gould's Sunbird (*Aethopyga gouldiae*). Kudos to Sagarika in our group who spotted White-crested Laughingthrush (*Garrulax leucolophus*) perched on the ground.

Our beautiful holiday amidst forests, close to Himalayas was a welcome change from the sweltering Hyderabad summer. Spotting of Mrs. Gould's Sunbird was the highlight of my trip. Thanks to Shafaat Saab for arranging a lovely trip.

Taking a break (Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

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TREKKING IN THE HIMALAYAS
TRIP REPORT: BINSAR, PANGOT & SATTAL

Dr Barnali Chaudhuri

Bineshwar Mahadev Temple, Binsar (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

19 of our members had gone to Binsar and Sattal on a birding trip. Starting from Hyderabad on April 24, 2018, we flew to Delhi, then boarded Ranikhet Express and reached Kathgodam early the next morning. Three Tavera vehicles were waiting for us. Thus began our journey to Binsar.

We stopped for breakfast on the way at Paulriya restaurant. The area was full of birds. We saw three kinds of Barbets – namely Coppersmith, Blue-throated, and Brown-headed – near the restaurant. Moving on, we stopped by the roadside to get a better view of a Crested Serpent Eagle. Driving along the Kosi river, we stopped for a *Shikanji* (lemon soda) near a Hanuman temple. Our driver, Prakash, informed us that the Kosi is a dangerous and turbulent river during the rainy season, despite its dried-up appearance now.

A nearby village (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

We observed for the first time the golden-coloured Bottlebrush flowers. After getting our tickets at the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) check point, we

reached Binsar KMVN (Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam) guest house, 2310 metre above sea level. We felt happy to visit Binsar, where Swami Vivekananda stayed for two or three days at the Binsar Dak Bungalow during his second visit to Almora in 1897. The guest house is in the midst of a thick Himalayan Oak and Buran forest. Buran (*Rhododendron arboreum*) is the state tree of Uttarakhand. The forest was dressed with the jewellery of red Buran flowers. Local people drink the juice of its flower which helps keep the heart healthy.

Rhododendron flowers
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

As there is no electricity available at Binsar Guest House, they supplied power through a generator till 9:00PM. Consumption of non-vegetarian food is prohibited under the Wildlife Act; eggs are the only non-vegetarian food allowed in Binsar. Campfires are not allowed as a precaution against forest fires. Jayati, Anjali and I were allotted room no. 202. I was surprised to note that instead of the 2nd floor up, it was 2nd floor down! All meals were provided at the guest house itself; with breakfast we also had the rhododendron flower juice, which was delicious. The warmth and generosity of the guest house staff touched our hearts.

Langur family (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

We stayed there for two days. During our stay we explored two main birding areas of Binsar:

1. Binsar Zero Point, located in the heart of Binsar WLS, Almora, is the highest view point, from where one can have a 360-degree panoramic view of the Himalayan Beauties namely Kedarnath, Chaukhamba, Trishul, Nanda Devi, Nanda Kot and Panchachuli peaks. Zero Point is a trek of around 2km from the guest house.

2. Bineshwar Mahadev Temple, which is the 13th century temple built by King Kalyan Chand of the Chand Dynasty.

Black-throated Tit (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

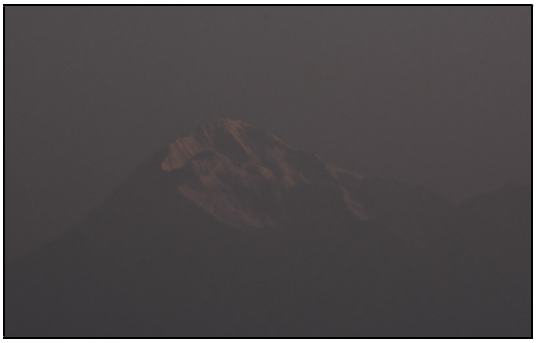
Indian Tortoiseshell (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Near the guest house, we saw several Langur families on the road side. A Jungle Crow was watching the road from a high tree top. A Black-throated Tit foraged for food among the mosses on an oak tree branch, and a Eurasian Jay was peeping out from the foliage. I noticed some small, beautiful white flowers on the road side.

We enjoyed the sunrise from the roof top view point of Binsar guest house. Around 5:30AM, the reddish sky welcomed the sun, which was rising from behind a mountain. The sun suddenly appeared like a golden plate and reached the top of the mountain in no time! We could see some Himalayan peaks, which were covered with snow as if they had draped themselves in white shawls. A few birds were chirping – we saw some Green-backed Tits moving around in the trees. The guest house staff served tea on the roof top view point itself, and used only steel cups, as Binsar is a plastic-free zone. I saw an Indian Tortoiseshell butterfly nearby the guest house rooftop, and some Purple Iris flowers also caught my attention.

Eurasian Jay
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Sunrise at Binsar
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)



The peaks barely visible through the clouds
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

During our stay at Binsar we went to Zero Point twice: once during sunset and then during early morning. Unfortunately both times we could not see the faraway Himalayan ranges clearly because of the clouds, though we did get some glimpses. We all enjoyed a lot trekking through the Zero Point trailing road, with the road-side stones glowing due to the mica content. We also did see some birds. The Verditer Flycatcher, with its shining rich copper-sulphate blue colour, is a common bird in this part of the Himalayas. We saw a Grey-winged Blackbird singing its very sweet song at the same place each time, protecting its territory. We saw a Black Kite in flight, and heard the call of the Barking Deer and, in fact, saw one running away no sooner than we saw it.

At Zero Point
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

We spent some time after dinner on the roof top, exchanging ghost stories in the moonlight! It was freezing cold, and we had to manage the rest of the night with candles. It was really a thrilling experience.

On April 26, our guides, Puran Singh and Ram Singh, showed us the birding spots near Bineshwar Mahadev Temple. We saw a Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush, an Oriental Turtle Dove calling from a nearby oak tree, and a Grey Bushchat. There was a flock of what seemed to be Rosefinches nearby; one adult male was red-headed, as if it had played Holi with *sindoor*. A Black-headed Jay was moving around in the field. Orchids on the tree trunks enhanced the beauty of the forest. Trekking up to the opposite side of the temple, we saw a Himalayan Woodpecker on a Silver Oak tree, searching for food in the moss. Violet-coloured thistle-like flowers on the thorny tree attracted butterflies. Green-backed Tits were playing around. Some wild flowers showed their beauty by the side of the trail.

Oriental Turtle Dove (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Green-backed Tit
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Black-headed Jay (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

After breakfast Arabinda, Shafaat Sir, Jayati, Anjali and I sat for some time in the shade on the hillside, enjoying the natural beauty all around us. Some small red insects were on the tree leaves. New leaves of Silver Oak looked like flowers.

Around 11:00AM, we started trekking again. The Rhododendron buds were attracting insects. We saw a Drongo sitting in between two tree trunks, a Rufous Sibia on a rhododendron tree trunk and an Ultramarine Flycatcher moving here and there. A Nuthatch was moving from this side to that side on a tree trunk. A Sailer butterfly was sitting nearby while an unidentified yellow butterfly was enjoying the honey from a wild white flower. One halved tree trunk was full of mushrooms, and wild red berries were aplenty. A Eurasian Jay was very busily finding its food, while some yellowish-green insects were moving on the dry leaves. On the way back for lunch, we saw more Verditer Flycatchers and Green-backed Tits near our guest house.

A Sailer sp. butterfly
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

The group at work (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

After lunch we again stepped out for birding under the guidance of Puran Singh. He is truly knowledgeable about the birds and their behaviour, and also about the trees in the forest. Having a learned guide like him opened up a new world. It reminded me again that travelling is indeed a part of education.

Rosefinch flock (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Blueberry tree (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Holly plant (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

An Oak tree was leaking resin, and Puran informed us that the resin is used for Ayurvedic purposes. He told us that all oak trees cannot produce resin. The root of Blueberry trees is used as a medicine for diabetes patients. Below the bark of the Holly plant used for Christmas decorations, we saw a yellow colour that can be used as a natural water colour. A pair of Turtle Doves was feeding on small pebbles which would strengthen their digestion systems.

Tree with twisted trunk
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

We chased the call of a Large Hawk Cuckoo and finally spotted the bird calling from high up on a tree. The guide showed us some small trees whose leaves smelled like *ajwain*, and told us that the leaves of the walnut tree emit odours to keep insects at bay. The lush green Chinese Bamboo trees, which Puran informed would not be as big as our bamboo trees, and the white Orchids on the oak tree, looked beautiful. We saw some perfectly round tree holes, and learnt that these types of tree holes were made for nests. One tree trunk was twisted around like a wire. There were some very small trees that were very soft to the touch; the guide said that the wool of those tree leaves would be used by Sunbirds to make their nests, along with generous use of spider webs.

On the trek to the Bineshwar Mahadev temple, we saw some woody white flowering plants called *anaphalis*; members of this genus are commonly known by the name Pearl or Pearly Everlasting.

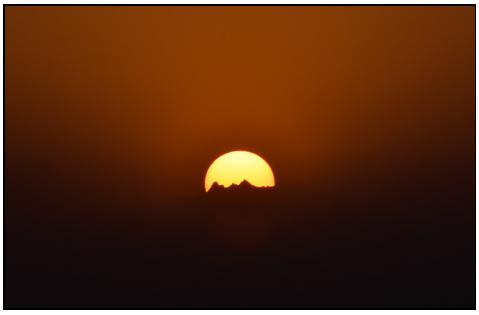
The *bichchu* plant
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

We were very fortunate to see a raptor show that lasted for 5 minutes. The show started with a Black Eagle. Within a moment a Himalayan Griffon was seen flying high. Then, one after another, the raptor show went on, with Red-headed and Eurasian Griffon Vultures also marking their attendance.

A temple in Binsar
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

After enjoying the raptor show, I visited the temple, and saw for the first time two temples together, one for Shiva and another with *yoni* only. Many of us went into the coffee shop opposite the temple, where we saw a bonsai rhododendron tree. Puran showed us the *bichchu* plant, which would give a burning sensation if touched. On the way back, we noticed another very small old temple on the hillside. A butterfly caught my eye because of its size – as big as a small bird! – it was the Orange Oakleaf. I found a Horse Chestnut fruit, which Puran informed us was toxic and inedible.

Orange Oakleaf (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)



Sunset (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

The sun was about to set by the time we got back. While enjoying the sunset from the dining hall, I was astonished to see a light hanging from the rhododendron tree outside the dining hall, which later turned out to be the reflection of the dining hall lamp shade.

Before saying goodbye to Binsar, we picked up some rhododendron juice and miscellaneous mementos like Uttarakhand T-shirts, shawls, scarves, sweaters etc from the guest house shop. Having thoroughly enjoyed our stay at Binsar, we started for Sattal around 11:00AM on April 27.

A scenic view (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Grey-hooded Warbler
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Sattal or Sat Tal means 'seven lakes' in Hindi. All of them are freshwater lakes filled mostly by underground springs located in the Nainital district of the Kumaon region. Most of these lakes are named after the Hindu mythological characters; they are called Ram Tal, Lakshman Tal, Sita Tal, Nal Dayamanti Tal, Panna Tal, Purana Tal and Sukha Tal. As the name suggests, Sukha Tal remains dry except during the monsoon.

Just a few minutes on the road, we saw a jeep toppled over and stuck in a tree on the side of the hill. Our drivers went to check whether anybody was injured or if any help was needed, but there was nobody inside the jeep. I found the humanity in these people moving, something we often lack in urban areas.

Driving along, we saw a Himalayan Woodpecker trying to get its food from a pine fruit. Birds like the Ultramarine Flycatcher, Alpine Swift and Green-backed Tits were seen here and there. A Rufous-bellied Woodpecker was also foraging on a tree.

Ultramarine Flycatcher Male
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

We had lunch at Maruti Restaurant, Nainital, where I noticed a local dog, which had thick hair to combat the cold. The trees covering the mountain tops looked like hair on the mountain head.

We passed by the Bhimtal Lake and reached Sattal tourist guest house around 4:15PM. There was a lake in front of the guest house; here electricity **was** available. There were monkeys sitting near the lake with their adorable babies, and Kayaking was under way in the lake.

Blue Whistling Thrush (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

After getting refreshed, Jayati asked us if we would like to go to visit Sattal Studio. I thought that it was a normal studio and did not take my binocular and camera. Just a 2-minute walk beside our rest house, we stepped inside the Sattal park, which is under the Reserve Forest, Bhowali Range, Sattal. A Blue Whistling Thrush looked like it was wearing a pearl necklace. After walking for another couple of minutes, we noticed many people with their big cameras sitting near a watery spot. I saw the live show of birds in front of my eyes, and realized the justification of the name 'Studio'. All the birds, specially the small ones, were coming, sitting on a twig, having a quick bath, and taking off into the nearby trees. It really was an amazing show.

Brown Fish Owl
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

After sunset, we moved to the lake for a while. We saw some Nightjars flying around, and Vikram captured a Brown Fish Owl in his camera. After some time, we returned to an enjoyable our dinner at the rest house canteen.

The next day, April 28, we moved out for birding at 5:30AM. I noticed that a person was sweeping the road, and the garbage consisted of twigs, leaves and nothing else, whereas our garbage is mainly plastics or non-biodegradable materials. It is high time we seriously rethink before using disposable plastic products like glasses, straws etc in our daily routine.

Jungle Myna (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

We entered the Sattal park and started trekking. A Jungle Myna was moving around, and a Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush was sitting on a tree. Along the trail, we saw a Red-billed Blue Magpie, a Red-wattled Lapwing near the pond, and some Green-backed Tits. A Green Pigeon sitting on a branch, Drongos busily protecting their territories, a Grey-winged Blackbird female on the grass near the pond, White-throated Laughingthrushes searching for food under the dry leaves, and some blue Nuthatches going up and down the tree trunk, added to the tally.

White-throated Laughingthrush
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Suddenly we noticed many people looking and pointing their cameras at a spot near the park entrance. A nest was hanging from a tall tree, and a Long-tailed Broadbill was sitting on the top of the nest!

Bar-tailed Treecreeper
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Red-billed Leiothrix
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

I saw the spectacular dance of the Red-billed Blue Magpie. There was moss growing on a broken tree trunk, and a Grey Treepie was sitting on it. A Fantail was dancing nearby, a Bar-tailed Treecreeper was creeping, and a Red-billed Leiothrix was moving around inside the bushes. Anjali spotted a Speckled Piculet while going towards the water falls in Sattal park. We heard the calling of some Green Pigeons nearby, and spotted them on the branch of a tree. We also heard the calling of the *Chausingha*, the four-horned antelope, from the top of a hill. A Eurasian Blackbird was bathing in the stream, and we also saw a pair of Asian Paradise-flycatchers.

Long-tailed Broadbill
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

While returning for breakfast, I saw a Long-tailed Broadbill, probably the same one seen earlier, sitting with some nesting material in its mouth. I was mesmerised to see the vivid colour combinations in the bird from so close up, and it was easily the bird of my trip. Nature is really so beautiful.

All of a sudden, we saw three men trying to fix some ropes on trees for the Flying Fox adventure activity (a.k.a. Zip Line) – probably, as the bird festival was going on in Sattal, they may have thought they could make some money out of it. Anjali immediately took a bold step: she enquired if they had permission, which they did not, so she asked them not to disturb the forest habitats, and tried to make them understand that if the forest was disturbed like this, there would not be any forest left for their children (the next generation). She also threatened them that she would bring it to the notice of the District Forest Officer. That scared them off and they dropped the idea. I really salute her for taking this bold initiative.

White-throated Fantail (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Lesser Yellownape
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

A competition for women bird photographers was going on, and hence we faced a problem getting proper guides. However, we somehow managed to arrange Suresh as our guide, who took us deeper into the Sattal Park after breakfast for more birding. Setting out, near the guest house we saw a Lesser Yellownape, a Black-headed Jay was moving around ignoring us, and an Oriental Magpie Robin was calling and dancing around. Entering the Sattal park, we saw a pair of Purple Sunbirds, a Greater Yellownape was peeping from inside a tree hole, and a Slaty-headed Parakeet was perching. A Blue Whistling Thrush was playing around in the pond, and a Red-billed Blue Magpie was on an oak tree, picking up insects from the moss. Green Pigeons were calling, and a Kingfisher was sitting near the pond to target fish. Some villagers were taking *dudhela* tree branches to feed their cows so as to get good milk.

Local women with the *dudhela* branches
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

The last part of the trek towards the waterfalls was really difficult. We could hear the waterfalls but were not able to see it. Finally we reached a point, from where we could see the waterfalls, around 12:30PM. Returning, we saw a Spotted Dove near the Studio; also White-throated Laughingthrushes, Mountain Bulbul, Ultramarine, Verditer and Fantail Flycatchers, Drongo, Oriental Magpie Robin etc. I saw a Praying Mantis under a pine tree. Anjali spotted a Long-tailed Minivet with spectacular orange colour.

Long-tailed Minivet
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Praying Mantis
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

After lunch we went to explore some other nearby birding spots with our guide Suresh. We reached Chanfi village around 4:00PM, hoping to see the Brown Dipper. On the bank of Kalsa river a Sandpiper welcomed us. The river bed was full of stones of all sizes, and we spent some time on the river bed, enjoying the surroundings. We saw a Red-vented Bulbul, a Dragonfly and an Oriental Turtle Dove. Pink-coloured grass flowers were dancing in the wind. After waiting for quite some time, the Brown Dipper finally came out and flew from side to side, showing its face to everybody who was eagerly waiting for its *darshan*. We saw a Woodpecker on a pine tree, but it was too far to identify.

We boarded the vehicle again for the next spot, but had to get down on the road at a spot where the river was flowing across. We saw a Great Barbet, and some big mushrooms on the tree trunk caught my eyes. We saw Plumbeous Water Redstarts, both male and female; I liked their broad tails, which looked like colourful clips at the end of a braid. We trekked to a bridge, from where we saw some Red-billed Blue Magpies. As we crossed the bridge, we saw a couple of Rufous-chinned Laughingthrushes on the trail road. One of them was calling while sitting on a nearby tree.

Great Barbet
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Plumbeous Water Redstart Male
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Plumbeous Water Redstart Female
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Barn Swallow Adult (L) and Chicks (R) (Photos: Vikram Penmetsa)

The next day, April 29, we started at 7:35AM for Pangot. We stopped for some snacks at a general store, where we were surprised to see a nest of Barn Swallows with its adorable babies.

Prakash, our driver, pointed out Naini Lake down below, shaped like a mango. We reached the Snow View Point at 8:30AM. Due to the clouds, there was not much visibility of the Himalayan peaks. Through the telescope we observed a Hanuman temple, Army trekking point, cinema shooting spot, step farming etc.

Step farming (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Our breakfast, *paratha* and potato curry, had already been packed from the guest house, and we enjoyed the same at 9:45AM, sitting on the road side. We saw an unusual Ashy Drongo with a white spot on its head, down the side of a hill. I also saw a tree full of larva. Surekha and I were enjoying photographing the butterflies. A Tortoiseshell butterfly was resting on a roadside stone. A big, colourful bee was sipping honey from a violet flower of a thorny tree. Another type of beautiful butterfly was sitting on a big stone. Ashok spotted a big Langur far away, sitting on a tree down the hill. Villagers were carrying dry wood from the forest for their fuel. Ashok pointed out a tree stump that looked just like an owl. Anjali was birding by herself and enjoying the natural surroundings. We passed a small waterfall, and came across the skull of some animal.

A colourful bee visiting a flower
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Suddenly we realized that Shafaat Sir's vehicle had got disconnected from us; we could not reach each other as there was no mobile signal, but managed to do so after a while. Clouds were kissing at the top of the mountains and coming further down. Soon it started raining, and we dropped the idea of birding at Vinayak and decided to head back. There was a big traffic jam while going back to Nainital. I was overjoyed at the sight of some very colourful flowers hanging from the balcony of a house. Around 1:40PM, a hailstorm also started.

Hydrangea flowers (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

We stopped at Machan Chinese restaurant for lunch, but unfortunately it was closed on Sundays, so we decided to have lunch at Maya Regency. On the way, we saw a rich violet bed of Jacaranda flowers. The restaurant was full of beautiful flowers of different types. Hydrangea flowers were everywhere. I was astonished to learn that the green flowers would become sky-blue within a short period of time. Roses of different colours attracted our eyes. I have never seen such huge orange hibiscus. There were many types of zinnia flowers.

A type of Bracket Fungus
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Many birds were dancing nearby – Oriental White-eyes, and both Lesser and Greater Yellownapes – on a nearby tree. The hotel surroundings were just like a dream. I regretted not carrying my camera here. Monkeys' Tail trees were hanging in the balcony of the restaurant. After lunch, we visited the Uttarakhand Textile Development Corporation, Khutani, Bhimtal at 3:45PM.

After we came back to Sattal, I could not resist going to the Sattal park again with Sagarika and Siddharth. After dinner, we attended a function arranged by YMCA Campsite Cum

Programme Center, Sattal. An artist was singing Hindi songs, accompanied by an orchestra; I especially enjoyed the flute.

On the field (Photo: Dr Geethanjali)

The next day, April 30, was our last day of birding on this trip. By this time we knew every nook and corner of Sattal Park. Jayati and I went to the Studio; this time there were no men with cameras around, since the bird festival had already concluded.

Spot-winged Starling pair
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

While we were refreshing ourselves in the serene nature of Sattal park, some stunning bird activity caught our attention. An apparent display of motherly affection was spotted by Anjali in one corner of the park. Far away a Great Barbet was moving around and coming back to feed her baby on the branch of a tree. The baby, perhaps concerned about its mother's whereabouts, became restless and flew to a branch of another tree right over our heads. Interestingly, on the same tree, a Parakeet was also affectionately feeding its baby in a tree hole. Noticing the intruder nearby its nest, the Parakeet became agitated – perhaps it sensed that the safety of its baby was at stake. It immediately screeched at the baby Barbet in its shrill voice. In all probability the baby Barbet never expected such rude behaviour, and for a few seconds it was totally puzzled as to what to do, particularly in the absence of her mother. Terrified with this incident the baby Barbet flew away. The entire incident taught us that birds like to live in their own territory. Some Drongos were also making sure of their territories. They were catching their prey in flight and coming back to the same branch of the tree from where they took off.

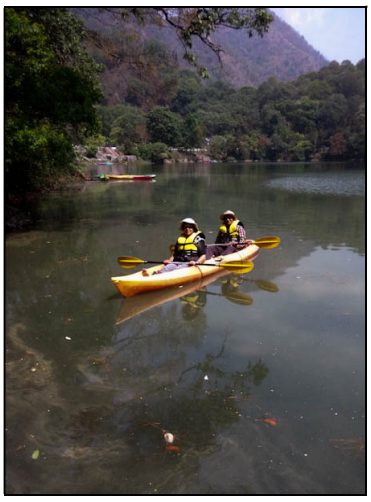
While coming back Arabinda suddenly pointed to the pond. We all rushed there, and noticed a Kingfisher diving into the pond with a laser focus; within seconds it came out with a small fish in its mouth. The most amazing part was to see the bird sharing the fish with another Kingfisher who was sitting on the same tree.

Then we went to see the Kalij pheasant. Both the male (a spectacular blue colour with its crest) and the female (overall a brownish colour) came down from the hill top to feed. A Oriental Magpie Robin was hanging around nearby. I noticed some wild strawberries on the side of the road. A Treecreeper was moving on the trunk of an oak tree in search of its food, and several Nuthatches were also moving here and there, along with a Fantail. Anjali spotted its nest which was just like a small cup. A flock of Red-billed Leiothrix popped up at the side of the trail in front of us, and flew away to the nearby dry bushes immediately.

Kalij Pheasant (Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch (Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

After breakfast, Arabinda and I enjoyed kayaking in the lake for one hour. Around 3:00PM, we started for Kathgodam Railway Station. We stopped at the same Paulriya restaurant for some tea/coffee at 4:30PM. I simply enjoyed sitting in the lap of nature. The youngest member of our group, Siddarth, spotted the Mrs. Gould's Sunbird, and Sagarika spotted the White-crested Laughingthrush down the hill, enriching our bird list. Around 5:45PM, we reached the Kathgodam station. Geetanjali, Anjali, Jayati, Siddarth and I went out of the station for a walk, and wandered through a residential area behind the railway station. The sun was setting with all its colour in the sky while a *Gulmohar* (*Krishnachura*) tree with all its red flowers was standing majestically by itself. Anjali spotted a Chestnut-shouldered Petronia, which reminded us of the story of Salim Ali, as it was the key to his introduction into ornithology.



Kayaking in Sattal Lake
(Photo courtesy: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

We boarded the train for Delhi again at 7:50PM, and the next day, May 1, we reached Hyderabad by flight, thus concluding our trip to the Himalayas.

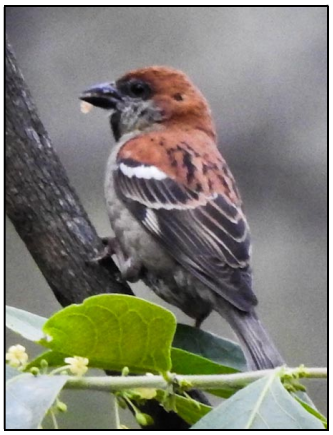
I would like to thank BSAP, and especially Shafaat Sir, for arranging this type of bird watching tour, and also all the fellow members of this trip for making it a grand success. I look forward to more such tours in future too.

List of birds seen during the trip:

Sl No	Common Name	Sl No	Common Name	Sl No	Common Name
1	Black Francolin	43	Eurasian Jay	85	Rusty-tailed Flycatcher
2	Hill Partridge	44	Black-headed Jay	86	Ultramarine Flycatcher
3	Black Kite	45	Red-billed Blue Magpie	87	Verditer Flycatcher
4	Black Eagle	46	Grey Treepie	88	Blue-throated Flycatcher
5	Himalayan Griffon	47	Large-billed Crow	89	Orange-bellied Leafbird
6	Eurasian Griffon	48	Green-backed Tit	90	Purple Sunbird
7	Red-headed Vulture	49	Great Tit	91	Black-throated Sunbird
8	Crested Serpent Eagle	50	Black-lored Tit	92	Grey Wagtail
9	Red-wattled Lapwing	51	Rufous-naped Tit	93	Common Rosefinch
10	Oriental Turtle Dove	52	Coal Tit	94	Black-and-yellow Grosbeak
11	Spotted Dove	53	Black-throated Tit	95	Oriental White-eye
12	Laughing Dove	54	White-throated Tit	96	Emerald Dove
13	Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon	55	Spot-winged Tit	97	Orange-headed Thrush
14	Plum-headed Parakeet	56	Barn Swallow	98	Common Myna
15	Slaty-headed Parakeet	57	Himalayan Bulbul	99	White-browed Fulvetta
16	Rose-ringed Parakeet	58	Red-vented Bulbul	100	White-throated (aka Hodgson's) Bushchat
17	Large Hawk Cuckoo	59	Mountain Bulbul	101	Red-breasted Flycatcher
18	Eurasian Cuckoo	60	Black Bulbul	102	Himalayan Flameback (or Goldenback)
19	Large-tailed Nightjar	61	Whistler's Warbler	103	Shikra
20	Alpine Swift	62	Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler	104	White-crested Laughingthrush
21	Common Kingfisher	63	White-throated Laughingthrush	105	Kalij Pheasant
22	Crested Kingfisher	64	Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush	106	Asian Koel
23	Great Barbet	65	Streaked Laughingthrush	107	White-throated Kingfisher
24	Brown-headed Barbet	66	Red-billed Leiothrix	108	Indian Grey Hornbill
25	Blue-throated Barbet	67	Blue-winged Siva	109	Chestnut-shouldered Petronia
26	Coppersmith Barbet	68	Rufous Sibia	110	Plain Prinia
27	Speckled Piculet	69	Whiskered Yuhina	111	Zitting Cisticola
28	Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	70	Brown Dipper	112	Black-chinned Babbler
29	Himalayan Woodpecker	71	Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch	113	White-browed Shrike-babbler
30	Greater Yellownape	72	White-tailed Nuthatch	114	Tickell's Thrush
31	Lesser Yellownape	73	Bar-tailed Treecreeper	115	Asian Brown Flycatcher
32	Grey-headed Woodpecker	74	Jungle Myna	116	Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher
33	Long-tailed Broadbill	75	Chestnut-tailed Starling	117	Spot-winged Starling
34	Ashy Woodswallow	76	Blue Whistling Thrush	118	Mrs Gould's Sunbird
35	Large Cuckooshrike	77	Eurasian Blackbird	119	Black-faced Warbler
36	Long-tailed Minivet	78	Grey-winged Blackbird	120	Grey-hooded Warbler
37	Black Drongo	79	Mistle Thrush	121	Yellow Wagtail
38	Ashy Drongo	80	Oriental Magpie Robin	122	Brown-fronted Woodpecker
39	Bronzed Drongo	81	Plumbeous Water Redstart	123	Rufous-bellied Woodpecker
40	Indian Golden Oriole	82	Spotted Forktail	124	Brown Fish Owl
41	White-throated Fantail	83	Grey Bushchat	125	Common Sandpiper
42	Asian Paradise-flycatcher	84	Blue Rock Thrush	126	Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush

Some other photos taken during the trip:

Ultramarine Flycatcher Male
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)



Russet Sparrow
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Spot-winged Starling Male
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Verditer Flycatcher
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Common Wall
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Pentatomid bugs
(Photo: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri)

Black-throated Tit
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Black-lored Tit
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Black-faced Warbler
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Common Sandpiper
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Purple Iris
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Rufous Sibia
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Dusky Crag Martin
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Streaked Laughingthrush
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Yellow-throated Marten
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Tickell's Thrush
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Asian Paradise-flycatcher Female
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Black Bulbul
(Photo: Shilka Chaudhari)

Black-headed Jay
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Long-tailed Broadbill
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

Eurasian Jay
(Photo: Vikram Penmetsa)

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